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LETTER

Minute - 27 JAN.

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FROM: P SMYTH  
POLITICAL AFFAIRS DIVISION  
27 JANUARY 1995



cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B  
PS/Michael Ancram (DENI, B&L) - B  
PS/Mr Moss (DHSS, DOE&L) - B  
PS/Baroness Denton (DED, DANI&L) - B  
PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B  
PS/PUS (B&L) - B  
PS/Mr Fell - B  
PS/Mr Spence, DOE  
Mr Watkins - B  
Mr Hamilton, DOE  
Mr Cowan, DOE  
Mr Maxwell - B  
Mr Maccabe  
Mr McCormick, DOE

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

LOCAL GOVERNMENT: STIRRINGS IN THE EAST

The purpose of this note is to alert colleagues to the possibility of developments in Council politics east of the Bann. I am not clear yet as to their significance, and perhaps those within the local government scene can offer a more accurate assessment; but the chief begetter is Mayor Coulter from Ballymena, and the machinations of such a shrewd operator deserve some consideration. I was unable to clarify with Coulter whether he had surfaced these concerns elsewhere, so I am taking the risk of possibly informing some colleagues of what they already know.

2. For some time now, Coulter has been nursing a sense of grievance about how the Councils in the north-east of the Province have suffered from official neglect. Numerous examples of this are cited - the A6 road to the north-west via Glenshane and Dungiven has been prioritised for funding at the expense of the A26 through Ballymena which arrives at the same destination; the IDB provide lower rates of grant-aid for Ballymena and the surrounding region than for areas west of the Bann; on quangoes and official bodies the

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North-east is seriously under-represented; and services, such as the NIHE regional offices, have been removed (or are threatened with removal) from the area and re-located to the north-west.

3. The conspiracy theory behind this is that the Government, either consciously or not, is discriminating against the north-east. The charitable explanation is that, instinctively, the official machine has become accustomed to delivering the available goodies to the more deprived areas, and has simply forgotten to check the state of play in the traditionally prosperous regions. The more red-blooded interpretation assumes that the same official machine knows very well what it is doing, and is simply in the hands of those who feel that the Protestant north-east deserves to experience a bit of retributive justice.

4. The first time I heard this, I was unsure about taking it seriously, feeling that, at bottom, it was little more than pique on the part of Councillor Coulter for not getting the place he coveted on the Police Authority. But now, it seems that this perception has a broader base, and is the motivating factor behind Coulter's scheme for the five other Councils in the Ballymena area - Ballymoney, Moyle, Coleraine, Larne and Antrim - to combine together in some kind of loose confederation whose objective is to promote collective regional action, independent of Government initiatives if necessary.

5. One of the items high on the group's agenda is to go to Brussels, to make a direct appeal for funding for the A26, basing their case on the manifest reluctance of the UK Government to act in an impartial fashion towards the region. There is also talk of undertaking trips abroad to promote inward investment. Initially, this is being thought of in terms of Councils sending representatives on IDB missions in an ambassadorial role; but Coulter himself has been pursuing private initiatives with foreign businessmen, and appears to be coming to the conclusion that he could do a much better job than the Government agencies.

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. Much of this strikes me as fairly blameless, and indeed as a praiseworthy attempt to take the initiative in local regeneration. But Coulter is alert to the potential long-term political implications of creating a successful "Eastern Bloc" of Councils. He is aware that a strong Unionist grouping which would act against the Nationalist Councils west of the Bann would be divisive in itself, and could create controversy across a range of wider issues - the powers to be exercised by local authorities, the idea of regional councils, and even the creation of an independent Ulster centred on the north-east.

7. Nevertheless, he is determined to press ahead with the idea, and invitations have issued for an initial meeting of the Councils to be held in Ballymena in the third week of February. He has discussed the idea with Mo Mowlam, who appeared to be supportive; and Hugh Smyth is said to be expressing an interest in the concept, to see how it might be adapted for Belfast.

8. As stated above, I am not sure how seriously we should be taking all this. Coulter himself is very fired-up about promoting Ballymena, and may be developing a tendency to feel that everyone who is not actively working for the same objective, must be working against it. But, at the very least, if there is evidence within the system to show that his perceptions of bias against the north-east are unfounded, we should deploy it before a potentially unhelpful anti-Government mood is allowed to become established in the area.

[signed PS]

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